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ABSTRACT

This study investigated teacher and peer perceptions of aggression in minority elementary school students enrolled in three urban public schools in southern California. Students (N=650) in grades 3, 5, and 8 were rated by teachers and completed a peer assessment questionnaire. Boys received significantly more peer nominations for aggressive behavior than did girls. In addition, boys' nominations increased from grades 3 to 8, while girls' nominations decreased. Total aggression ratings by teachers were significantly greater for boys than for girls, and ratings increased as students progressed through the grades. Teacher and peer perceptions of aggressive behavior were more congruent for males than for females. Teacher ratings understated levels of aggression of females relative to peer assessments. A list of 25 references is included. (BC)

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Teacher and Peer Perceptions of Aggression Among Minority Youth

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TEACHER AND PEER PERCEPTIONS OF AGGRESSION

Abstract

Teacher and peer perceptions of aggression were investigated in a sample of minority elementary school students. Students in grades 3, 5, and 8 were rated by teachers and completed a peer assessment questionnaire within classrooms. Sex and age differences were found in the amount of aggression displayed. Teacher and peer perceptions of aggressive behavior were more congruent for males than for females. Teacher ratings tended to understate levels of aggression for females relative to peer assessments. These findings were related to previous research, and issues relevant to the accurate identification of deviantly aggressive minority youth were discussed.

Teacher and Peer Perceptions of Aggression Among Minority Youth

Deviant levels of aggression displayed by young people in both schools and communities extract an incredibly high toll on the lives of victims and perpetrators alike (Lorion, Tolan, & Wahler, 1987), and ignoring the problem will only escalate that cost. The developmental continuity in patterns of aggressive behavior has been shown to be quite pervasive (Feshbach & Fraczek, 1979). Olweus (1979), for example, concluded that there is a substantial degree of stability over time for aggression in males, roughly comparable to the stability of measures of intelligence over time. Further, children who display deviant levels of aggression have been repeatedly found to be at risk for a host of negative interpersonal outcomes.

For example, research on the etiology of juvenile delinquency has firmly linked childhood interpersonal aggression and delinquency. Prior knowledge of a child's level of aggressive behavior in school has led to a 45% improvement over chance in the prediction of later delinquency, and early aggressiveness is most consistently related to later crimes against persons rather than property crimes (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber 1987).

Deviantly aggressive children are also at risk for social rejection by peers, which in turn puts them at risk for numerous other negative developmental outcomes. A growing body of sociometric evidence demonstrates that peer rejection is most often prompted by aggressive behavior (Dodge, 1983). Children who have problems interacting with their peers are at risk for poor school

adjustment, greater than average rates of school drop out, deficient social problem solving skills, and higher rates of referral for mental health problems (Cox & Gunn, 1980). In fact, peer rejection is often the most robust single early indicator of subsequent contact with a psychiatric facility (Cowen, Pedersen, Babigian, Izzo, & Troost, 1973).

Youthful displays of deviantly aggressive behavior have been empirically associated with a host of negative consequences; however, findings regarding age and sex differences in the display of childhood aggression have been extremely varied. For example, measures of sex differences in aggression find that males are more aggressive, but there is disagreement over the magnitude and stability of these differences. Whereas Macoby and Jacklin (1974, 1980) assert the presence of clear sex differences in aggression, Hyde's (1984) reanalysis using meta-analytic techniques found that such differences accounted for less than 5% of the variance. Sex differences are often found to be dependent upon the type of aggressive behavior displayed as well. Though boys consistently show higher rates of physical aggression, sex differences in verbal aggression are quite inconsistent (Archer, Pearson, & Westerman, 1988), and "indirect" strategies of aggression are sometimes more characteristic of girls (Cairnes, Cairnes, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989). There is also evidence to suggest that sex differences in aggression may be situationally dependent, such that only certain types of aggression-inducing circumstances serve to discriminate between the sexes (Deaux, 1985).

With regard to developmental changes, findings are also somewhat inconsistent. There is evidence that overall, displays of aggressive behavior decline with age (Parke & Slaby, 1983; Hyde, 1984), that such displays increase with age (Whiting & Whiting, 1975), and that age related changes are dependent upon the types of aggression in question (Cairnes et al., 1989).

This study focuses on aggression among minority youth as it is perceived by teachers and peers in the school setting. Minority youth are an especially compelling population to study in school based aggression research in that although African-American children represent 25% of the national public school population, they comprise 40% of all suspensions and expulsions (Reed, 1988). Almost half (45%) of all suspensions and expulsions are prompted by school staff perceptions of excessive levels of verbal or physical aggression, most often in the context of peer interaction (Reed, 1988). Thus African-American youth are much more likely to be perceived as behaving aggressively than are their Anglo counterparts. Recent empirical data also suggest that among elementary school students, African-American males are at significantly higher risk for being rated as aggressive by both peers and teachers (Grande, 1988). The tragedy is that although suspension may provide symptomatic relief for schools, it does not address the root causes of aggressive behavior and banishes those very children who are most in need of the beneficial influences of a caring school environment and positive peer relations.

Teacher perceptions are of special concern given the

significance of teacher ratings in assessing aggressive behavior in the schools. Teachers have the primary responsibility to identify and refer students for available intervention programs as well as formal disciplinary action. Teachers are regularly called upon as well in the service of research to nominate students who are excessively aggressive. Therefore, the accuracy of teacher perceptions becomes a matter of concern, given the need to avoid the misidentification of minority youth (Sugai & Maheady, 1988). When one considers that children are more likely to engage in peer directed aggression while not under the supervision of the teacher (Lancelotta & Vaughn, 1989), and that low-income minority children may be differentially exposed to contexts and expectations which support relatively higher levels of aggressive behavior, the possibility exists that teachers' judgments regarding aggressive behavior may be based on incomplete, misleading, or inaccurate information.

The present study was undertaken to address inconsistent research findings on the nature of sex and age differences in the display of aggression, and to explore the relationship between teacher and peer perceptions of aggression among this population. It was anticipated that boys would be rated higher on all measures of aggression, and that this disparity would increase with age. In line with the developmental increases in manifest aggression reported in Whiting and Whiting's (1975) cross-cultural data, it was also hypothesized that ratings of aggression in general would increase with age. Finally, this study assessed the level of

agreement between teacher and peer perceptions of aggression. Since some studies have found females to adopt more indirect, less discernible forms of peer directed aggression, teacher and peer perceptions of aggression were expected to be more similar for male students than for female students.

Method

Sample Description

Subjects were students enrolled in the third, fifth, or eighth grade in three urban public schools in Southern California. All students in regular education classes who returned parent permission slips, and were present on the day of data collection were included in the study (N=650, 346 males and 304 females). A total of 21 classroom groups (15 different teachers) participated in the research activities (5 third grade classes, 5 fifth grade classes, and 11 eighth grade classes). Mean ages of subjects by grade level were as follows: grade three M=8.7, grade five M=10.7, grade eight M=13.8.

Students at each site were residents primarily of the community surrounding the school, largely lower SES neighborhoods. A substantial proportion (range 16-20%) of the student body at each site is eligible for the free lunch program. African-Americans comprised the majority (74%) of the sample; 20% were Latino, and 6% were either Asian or Anglo. All students included in the study were fully proficient in English.

Procedure

Research activities were initiated within classrooms six weeks

after the start of the fall semester in order to allow the students and teacher in each class to develop stable and reliable perceptions of student behavior. Each student was first provided with a class roster. The researcher requested that each student review the class roster, locate his or her own name, and specify any names which were unfamiliar. In this manner, any uncertainty regarding the identity of classmates was remedied at the outset. All students were next provided with a set of five peer assessment questions. After assurances that responses would be held in strict confidence, students were asked to name three classmates who best fit each of three aggressive and two prosocial behavioral descriptions: this student starts fights, this student disrupts the group, this student loses his/her temper easily, this student works well with other students, this student helps other students. These statements represent specific behaviors which have been found in previous research to be related to peers' perceptions of aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1988). All items on the protocol were read aloud to eliminate error due to differences in reading ability among subjects.

After finishing the questionnaire, students completed a distractor exercise consisting of timed word puzzles, in order to eliminate possible residual discussions of the negative peer assessments. Prizes, prominently displayed for the duration of the research activities, were awarded to four students in each class. Thus, student excitement and attention was focused away from the assessment procedure and onto the distractor competition.

While students completed the peer assessment, teachers completed the aggression subscale of the Teacher Checklist (Coie and Dodge, 1988; Coie, 1990) for every student enrolled in the class. The instrument allows the rater to specify the intensity of observed verbal and physical aggression for each rated individual (e.g., "this child overreacts to accidental hurts with anger and fighting"). Each of eight behavioral items is rated on a scale of 1 to 5 ranging from "not at all" to "very much". Internal consistency of the subscale is quite high (α=.95), and six week test-retest reliability is excellent (r=.94) (Coie, 1990).

Results

Scores from the peer assessment instrument were first standardized within classrooms (z scores with mean=0 and sd=1) to adjust for differences in class sizes. Overall peer aggression scores were derived by summing each child's nominations for the three aggressive behavior items on the peer protocols. Internal consistency among the three indicators of aggressive behavior (starts fights, loses temper, disrupts group activities) was substantial; Cronbach's α=.88, and intercorrelations ranged from .76 to .62, p<.01. Teacher ratings were similarly summed over all eight items to yield a composite aggression score (range 8-40). Again, internal consistency was quite high; Cronbach's α=.97, and intercorrelations ranged from .68 to .92. Standardized peer ratings of aggression and teacher ratings of aggression were then each analyzed separately in a 2 (gender) X 3 (grade level) analysis of variance (ANOVA). For purposes of comparing teacher and peer

perceptions, standardized scores for peer assessments and teacher ratings were analyzed by means of Pearson product-moment correlations.

Peer Assessment

Overall boys received significantly more nominations for aggressive behavior (fighting, losing one's temper, disrupting small group activities in the classroom) (M = 10.6) than did girls (M = 4.4), $t(648) = 8.78$, and this difference is particularly true among fifth graders, with a gender x grade interaction of $F(2, 649) = 8.25$, $p<.01$ (see Table 1 for unstandardized score means). Whereas fifth grade males received the greatest average number of nominations for aggression, fifth grade females received the fewest. Additionally, males' overall nominations showed an absolute increase from third to eighth grade, while females' nominations showed an absolute decrease.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Each of the three peer measures of aggression were analyzed individually as well (See Table 1). All sex differences were significant; however, grade level differences independent of gender were not significant, nor were grade by gender interactions. Fighting is the specific behavior which shows the greatest overall sex differences $F(1, 649) = 99.25$, $p<.001$) and thus best discriminates between the sexes. Nominations for disrupting the group showed somewhat smaller though highly significant differences

$F(1, 649) = 73.13$, $p<.001$), and losing one's temper yielded the smallest sex differences $F(1, 649) = 17.46$, $p<.001$). An inspection of group means reveals that grade level differences in scores are generally negligible, the largest being the modest (1 point) increase from grade 3 to grade 8 in boys' scores for disrupting the group.

Teacher Ratings

Total aggression ratings by teachers were significantly greater for boys than for girls ($F[1, 649] = 3.90$, $p<.01$). Although this disparity increased with increasing grade levels, no significant interaction effects were detected (see Table 2). When teacher ratings of individual items representing specific behaviors of interest were analyzed, boys continued to score significantly higher than girls on ratings of both physical ("this child starts fights") ($F[1, 649] = 22.50$, $p<.001$) and verbal ("this child says mean things to peers") ($F[1, 649] = 11.52$, $p=.001$) aggression.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Furthermore, contrary to recent research, total aggression ratings increased significantly with grade for all subjects ($F [2, 647] = 3.85$, $p<.01$). Total aggression ratings also showed a moderate, positive correlation with age of subjects ($r=.13$, $p<.01$). The individual rating for "starts fights" showed the only decline from third to eighth grade, and only for males.

Relationship Between Teacher and Peer Perceptions

The initial hypothesis that teacher and peer ratings would be more similar for males than females was analyzed using standardized scores of aggression ratings by teachers and standardized peer assessment nominations for aggression. For the entire sample, overall teacher ratings of aggression correlated significantly with overall peer assessment scores ($r=.60$, $p<.01$). Correlations between individual items on the teacher rating and peer assessment measures ranged from .42 to .54, $p<.01$.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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The overall peer nominations and teacher ratings of aggression demonstrated higher correlations for boys ($r=.64$, $p<.01$) than for girls ($r=.51$, $p<.01$), supporting the initial hypothesis. Further, an ANOVA of difference scores between standardized teacher and peer ratings showed a significant main effect of gender (F [1, 649] = 8.25, $p<.01$). An inspection of mean differences among standardized teacher and peer rating scores revealed that teachers understated aggression among females (mean difference =.19) relative to peer perceptions while agreeing more closely with peers' perceptions of males' behavior (mean difference=.09) (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Discussion

The strong correlations found between the measures used to assess teacher and peer perceptions of aggression support their validity. Consistent with previous research and the initial hypothesis, boys were seen as significantly more aggressive than girls on both peer and teacher measures and across all grades. However, the evidence of higher teacher ratings of aggressive behavior for subjects in upper grades is directly contrary to previous findings of consistent reductions with age in ratings of aggression. Fighting was the only specific behavior for which teacher ratings declined across grade levels. Teacher ratings for all other behaviors showed increases for both boys and girls. These findings highlight the necessity for precise operational definitions when measuring a complex construct such as aggression. Great care must be taken so that such definitions are also interpreted in an equivalent fashion by both respondents and researchers. Respondents in previous studies may possibly have equated aggression specifically with overt physical behavior such as fighting, which might account for the decline in ratings of aggression.

Though teachers carry the major responsibility for student identification and referral for special services and discilplinary action, teachers and peers disagree in their evaluation of aggressive behavior for minority females. Peers are apparently reporting some facet of behavior which typically does not significantly impact the teacher's daily routine. The specific aggressive behavior which peers report most often for girls (losing

one's temper) may be most likely to occur in contexts outside the purview of the teacher. In contrast, fighting and disrupting group activities are behaviors which can be at least as troublesome for teachers as for peers, if not more so. Evidence of the sizeable difference between teacher and peer perceptions of aggression among minority females raises serious concerns in light of the predictive power of peer ratings of aggression which has been demonstrated in a host of longitudinal studies (e.g., Robins, 1966; Cowen et al., 1973; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1977).

The discrepancies between teacher and peer assessments for minority females in particular suggest yet another facet of the current controversy regarding the assessment of minority youth. As educators and researchers grapple with the problem of overidentification of minority youth (Sugai & Maheady, 1988), this data suggests that minority females may be receiving insufficient rather than excessive attention.

The need for teachers to assess minority students likely to be culturally different from themselves poses myriad problems. One excellent solution is the current emphasis on functional assessment (Sugai & Maheady, 1988; Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 1989) for students referred for behavioral disorders. The functional approach includes direct behavioral observations across a variety of contexts within the school environment. Thus referrals do not rely solely on the perceptions and reactions of a single individual (the teacher), and the observation of behavior in contexts outside of class may yield clues as to the functional

significance of a given behavior for the child. When viewed in context, judgments of the appropriateness of many behaviors may well be affected.

In addition to observations, proponents of the functional assessment approach suggest that all children should be screened regularly to determine their risk status for deviant behavior (Walker & Fabre, 1987). As one component of regular screening, the collection of peer assessment data might prove valuable. The predictive power of peer assessment, coupled with the problems of evaluating culturally different minority students, speaks to the clarity of the view from the peer group (Lancelotta & Vaughn, 1989). Peers appear to be in touch with sources of information which are unavailable to the classroom teacher, most especially for female students. Though peer assessments will pose some thorny problems of their own, the longitudinal significance of peer input makes it well worth the efforts required to devise valid and reliable methodology.

These data clearly replicate the finding of heightened levels of aggression among males and equally as clearly contradict the findings of decreasing aggression with increasing age. Most important, however, are the questions raised regarding the accuracy of teacher perceptions of aggression among minority youth. Further research is needed for the development of more valid assessment practices.

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Table 1

Peer Ratings of Aggression

Subjects	Peer Assessment items: Loses Temper	Starts Fights	Disrupts	Overall Aggression
All Boys (n=346)	3.15	3.85	3.59	10.64
Grade 3	3.24	3.74	2.89	10.18
Grade 5	3.28	4.08	3.89	11.18
Grade 8	2.92	3.72	3.98	10.57
All Girls (n=304)	1.92	1.03	1.38	4.47
Grade 3	1.93	1.23	1.91	5.29
Grade 5	1.63	0.67	0.95	3.23
Grade 8	2.19	1.19	1.27	4.68

NOTE: All scores for boys are significantly greater than their corresponding scores for girls at a level of $p = .01$ or less.

Table 2

Teacher Ratings of Aggression - Selected Items

Subjects	Measures of Aggression			
	Reactive Aggression	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression	Overall Aggression
All Boys (n=346)	2.55	2.62	2.46	17.80
Grade 3	2.39	2.44	2.71	16.45
Grade 5	2.73	2.57	2.39	17.27
Grade 8	2.53	2.84	2.28	19.70
All Girls (n=304)	1.13	1.60	1.70	11.74
Grade 3	1.16	1 08	1.50	11.21
Grade 5	1.03	1.93	1.66	11.60
Grade 8	1.29	1.78	2.07	12.92

NOTE: All scores for boys are significantly greater than their corresponding scores for girls at a level of $p = .01$ or less.

Table 3

Standardized Overall Aggression Scores

	Measures of Aggression	
Subjects	Teacher Ratings	Peer Ratings
Girls (n=304)	m =-.231 (.92)	m =-.041 (1.08)
Boys (n=346)	m =.184 (1.03)	m =.274 (1.2)

Note. Standardized scores are Z scores: m = 0, (sd = 1)

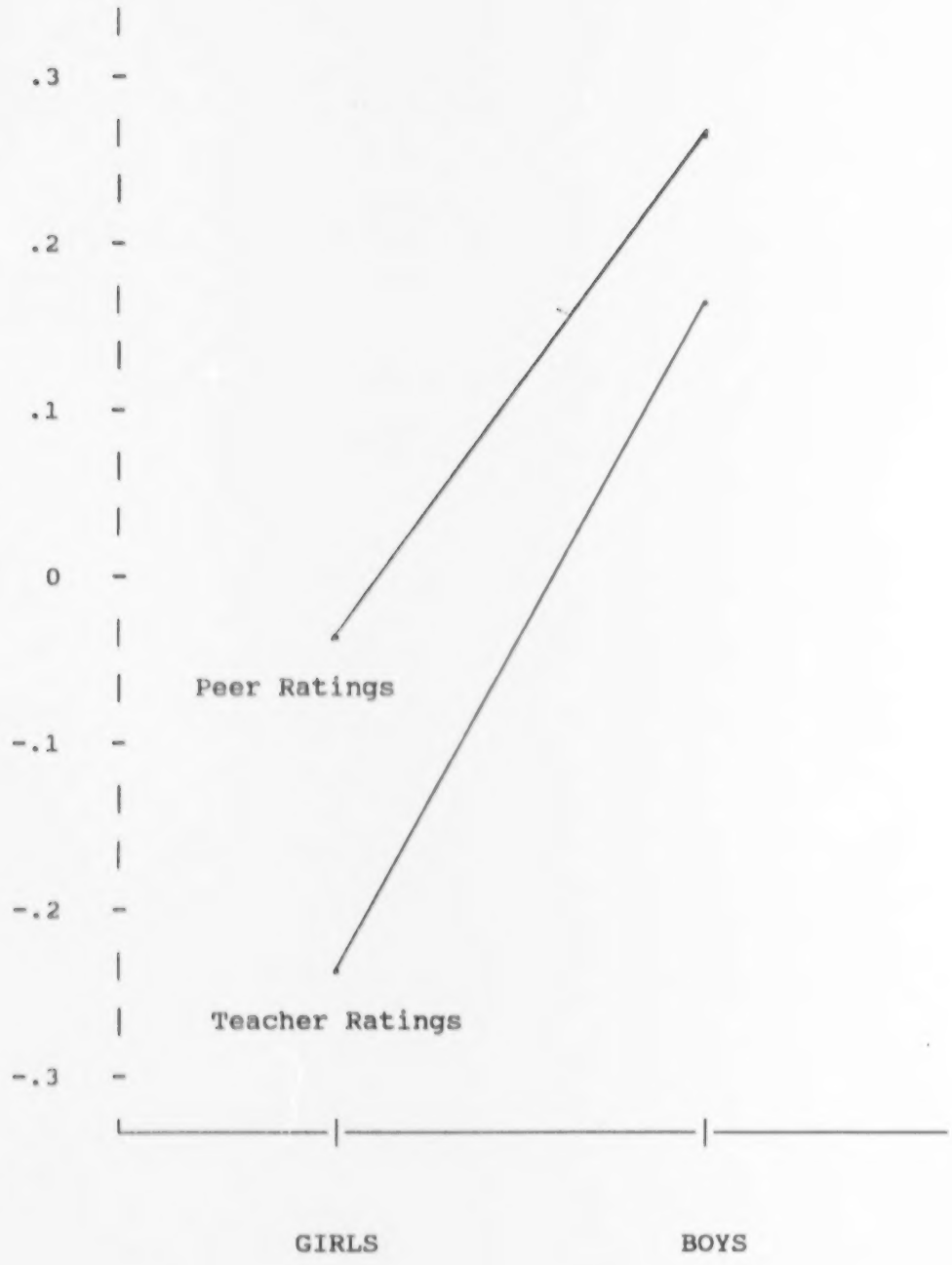

Figure 1

Standardized Teacher and Peer ratings of Overall Aggression